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Educating Muslims, Conceptual Issues

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Educational Backwardness among Muslims is drawing increased attention the world over. Questions about the roots of the problem and possible strategies to address the core issues are being deliberated and discussed in social and political circles.* In this paper I will briefly explore the role of religion, religious institutions, Indian history, state policies, community realities and mindsets of the community to analyse key concerns. The second part of the paper proposes concrete measures that can be taken based on the analyses presented.

The Role of Islam

An important question to be asked is whether Islam restricts or discourages education in any way. To answer this we need to refer to Holy the Quran as well to the Hadith to examine how education is perceived and who is allowed to access education.

Like any other religion, Islam also considers the acquisition of education to be a compulsory obligation. The first word revealed of the Quran was "*Iqra*" which means "Read, seek knowledge, educate yourselves, be educated". The holy Quran has hundreds of verses about education and there are several references in the Hadith mentioning the significance of education in Islam. One of the verses of Quran says "*If you want to acquire education and knowledge, you can go to China*". China was not an Islamic country. Therefore the kind of education the Quran is referring to here is not religious education, but the worldly education. Such a verse implies there was no inhibition in Islam to acquire knowledge from anywhere in the world. The verse never referred to who could or could not acquire knowledge indicating that irrespective of gender, the opportunity for education was open to all.

Did Islam have any scholars in its history? Is there any major contribution from these scholars to mankind? It is important to point out here that, Hazrath Ayesha (RA) Prophet Mohamed's (PBUH) wife was a great scholar whom people often approached for her knowledge and guidance. In the period between the 8th and the 14th century, Islam gave the world a large number of scholars who have contributed immensely to human knowledge in the fields of science, astronomy, medicine, surgery, engineering and philosophy. To name a few- Abu al-Qasim al-Zahraawi has been recognised as "Father of modern surgery", Al hazen is considered as the "Father of modern optics", and Al-Biruni is widely accepted as "the founder of comparative studies in human culture"

These examples suggest that Islam emerged as a great civilizational force that fostered intellectual and scientific development. So what went wrong? Why are today Muslim's educationally backward? Why are they not giving much importance to education? What historical processes and events created this rupture? To answer these perturbing questions, we may have to look at the outcome of India's colonization by the British and its impacts on Indian Muslims.

Colonization and Muslims in India

The process of colonization of India by the British colonial power began in 1757 AD as they snatched power from Muslim rulers in different parts of the sub-continent. From the very beginning therefore the foreign rulers adopted a discriminatory policy, hostile towards the Muslims. With the revolt of 1857 led by Muslims, colonial forces further regarded the Muslims as a potential threat to their political power. The Muslims, naturally, were hostile to the alien rule and showed their apathy to the new administration. Their privileges were then withdrawn, government jobs were denied to them and trading facilities were restricted. As Muslims did not like the new system of education introduced by the British, they stayed away refusing to accept the new education system, to the detriment of the traditional system. By the time Muslims realised that their non-cooperation with the new administration was adding to their miseries and backwardness, it was too late and they are much behind the other communities.

In addition, the 'divide and rule' policy of the colonial powers instilled communal feelings among the two major communities, Hindus and Muslims. As a result of this, it did not take much to inflame anti-Muslim feelings in Hindus. This finally led to the

Partition which only worsened the situation of the Muslims. As a result of all these factors, Muslims were relegated to the margins and slowly formed the lower cadre in the new social order which emerged in the country. Post independence policies and practices have further aggravated the educational backwardness and isolation of Muslims.

The impact of this marginalisation is highlighted Sachar Committee findings which reveal that even today; Muslims are one of the most backward communities in the field of education and literacy in the country.

Critical Issues

1. **Lack of visionary leadership-** Post independence, a major setback to the community is lack of proper leadership. Muslims not only lack political leadership, but also lack social and cultural leadership as a community. The present Muslim political leadership lack a personal rapport with the Muslim poor and do not have an analytical or in-depth understanding of the problems of the community. Therefore their plans and schemes are not realistic, be it in education or other economic fields.
2. **Muslims are not a homogeneous community.** Indian Muslims are not and should not be treated as a homogeneous community. They have sectarian, regional, caste, class and cultural differences which are quite crucial to the understanding of the problem. Most academics, unfortunately, and the Muslim leaders themselves, like to treat Indian Muslims as a homogeneous mass. Even in matters like literacy, family planning and economic development, there are regional, economic and cultural differences which have to be kept in mind.
3. **Sense of alienation-** The major problem Muslims are facing is a sense of alienation, the feeling that we don't belong to this land, and will always be treated as "outsiders". The sense of being watched all the time and accused of "anti national "activities has made people feel restless. If something goes wrong globally or locally Muslims are always being held answerable. There is no safety ensured for Muslim youth as anytime the police can arrest them. Such an atmosphere of fear and suspicion is not conducive for learning.

The political milieu just after the partition made Muslims feel demoralized when they could not even ask the question as to why the doors of defence forces were barred to Muslims under directions from Nehru's government. Even today we have very few Muslims in the civil services and policy service. In Karnataka we have only one police officer of IPS ranking who is going to retire by 2015. After him a big void will be created.

4. **Issues of safety and security-** Riots, communal tensions and communal attacks have also become every day's reality- where the majority of victims are always Muslims. Their small establishments and business are easily destroyed and women attacked with impunity.
5. **Poverty-** Most of the Muslim population is below poverty line and are caught in a vicious cycle from which they cannot escape. Although the economic and social situation of Muslims is not the same throughout India, one cannot deny the fact that poverty and lack of genuine financial resources are hampering socio- educational development of the community at every step. Parents are not in the condition to take the responsibility of the children. So, child labour is rampant and children are slogging in hazardous jobs instead of going to school.
6. **No special programme from the government:** Post independence, positive discrimination and special interventions were designed for dalits. These brought about rapid changes among dalits. Similar steps were not taken for Muslims. The Sachar Committee findings reveal that since independence India Muslims have remained backward in comparison to all other majority or minority communities. Despite these finding and recommendations, strong actions have not been taken to improve the situation through support and reservation, though the state can easily do so. It is typical of India's political and social ethos that this gross under-representation of a significant religious minority is not treated as a important an issue. Such discussion would be rather viewed as 'communal' and considered to be anti-secular.
7. **Monitoring and implementation of the government programmes** As Indian citizens we all have constitutional rights including free access to education.

However, it is not clear which agency is tracking and monitoring enrolments and drop outs. Though there are special residential schools in rural areas like Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, Morarji Desai residential schools and hostel facilities it is not clear how many Muslim children are in these schools? Similarly monitoring and impact assessment of the Minority Development Corporation's support for economic activities and scholarships of Muslim youth is not being done rigorously. Where is this money going?

8. **Madrassa Education-** The Madrassa education is always seen as the breeding ground for religious fanaticism and orthodoxy. However, it is mainly poor Muslims who cannot afford secular education. When the Government fails to provide primary education, the poor and the destitute, and especially single women who can't take care of their children end up sending their children to Madrasas. The problem is what these children educated in Madrasas can do in the job market? Some of the Madrasas have recently taken up secular education without proper curriculum and instructional design. If these children want to get into secular education, is that really possible?
9. **Basic Dignity and Identity** – The most painful problem of Muslim Indians is the discriminatory attitudes of the majority community towards them in all walks of life. Institutionalised discrimination and extreme intolerance against Muslims have made them feel insecure, marginalized and deprived, always afraid of losing their identity. In courts of justice too Muslims have been deprived of their rights as equal citizens in the common domain. More importantly they have been deprived of their collective right to a distinct religious, cultural and linguistic identity.
10. **Role of Ulemas** – It is surprising to see the *ulemas* who have to guide a community fighting over jamaath's and different school of thoughts. It is also disturbing that the imam of a masjid does not even see the extremely difficult financial condition of the community members. Is he really unaware that most of them are illiterate and that there are no good schools, hospitals, and other civic amenities around his masjid? The madrassas too are not teaching critical thinking or embracing a positive engagement with the people. Though they are the influencers of the community, the positive role they can play is not being realised.

11. **Girls Education-** when compared to women from other faiths in India, the majority of Muslim women are among the most disadvantaged, least literate, most economically impoverished and politically marginalized sections of Indian society. While debates on personal law and divorce are pertinent and timely, and one is not for a minute running down these issues, Muslim women need to be seen as social beings too, entitled to the same rights that the Constitution of India grants to all its citizens. The right to education, especially at the primary level is mandated by the Constitution, yet over six decades after Independence less than 50% of Muslim women in India are literate.

How Can Muslims be pulled out of the quagmire of backwardness?

If we all have a vision that our younger generations should be educated, employed, lead a dignified life without fear and not get into anti social activities, we should have both long term and short term plans. Short term plans.

Forming Mohalla committees-

- a) Mohalla committees should work with the masjids, conduct dropout surveys and children should be enrolled to the nearby schools.
- b) Friday Sermon's should be on importance of education and Zakath should be collected and use for educating children.
- c) Every Masjid has madrasa. Government support can be taken to upgrade and run proper schools with both religious and secular education, without fighting on different jamaath's
- d) Wakf boards should be activated and they should be accountable to people. The wakf money should also be used to generate employability and education.
- e) Up gradation of Urdu schools and implementation of government projects effectively
- f) Learning regional language should be encouraged

Ulema's should be taken into confidence-

- a) Series of interactions should be planned with ulemas with regard to their sermons and their activities to make them responsible towards their own community.

- b) Exposure visits, interactions should be planned between the Ulema's and the intellectuals of the community, as well as with progressive Ulema's

Career counselling – There is currently no relation between education, employability and the potential of the youth. To make them aware of their potential and preparing them accordingly, each youth should get career counselling.

Most of these short term plans are achievable if the educated, intellectual and affluent Muslims can come together and take up the responsibilities within their capacities.

Long term plan

Measuring the diversity of the community –Considering Muslims are not a homogenous community one solution is not going to solve the problems. Studies should be initiated and accordingly education and employment solutions should be evolved

Identifying and Developing Young leaders-Developing the leaders from the grass root level those who can vision and work for the community

Reservation of Seats for minorities- Number of seats in the assembly and parliament should be reserved for minorities

Special officers should be appointed- Special officers should be appointed to implement and track the government programmes for Muslims.

Building relationship- Building relationship with other OBC groups and dialogues should be initiated

These long term plans should be lobbied and pressure groups should be created for their implementation and monitoring.

Now at this hour these should be taken on war footing. What is needed now by the Muslim leaders and intellectuals is genuine commitment, a social vision and dynamic approach. To give a concrete shape to this, think tanks should be established in every state by non-political, non-partisan Muslim intellectuals along with other secular elements genuinely sympathetic to uplift of minorities. These think tanks can take into account the actual condition of Muslims in the respective states and devise

measures to help solve their local problems. Mere breast-beating and culture of complaints would not take them very far. Hard work and establishment of proper institutions alone will help them. The earlier this is realised, the better it is for the uplift of Muslims.

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